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ABSTRACT

Techniques that reduced teacher absences from 8.7 to 7.6 per year in the Milwaukee Public Schools are described in this report. The techniques include (1) information, in each new teacher's orientation kit, on the district's attitude toward good attendance, (2) articles about sick leave in the staff bulletin, (3) periodic reminders and training for principals and supervisors concerning sick leave usage, (4) a space for comments on sick leave on staff evaluation forms, and (5) promotion of public health assistance programs. Some suggested techniques rejected by the teachers' union are presented, including an absence verification form to be filled out for every absence, a survey of employees on working conditions, and a requirement that teachers inform supervisors of each impending absence. Also included is a short outline of a handbook used by the district to teach principals and other supervisors the ABCs of effective sick leave administration. According to the description, the handbook includes forms for keeping attendance records, guidelines for chronic offenders, and incentives for good attendance. Also reproduced here are a warning letter sent to employees needing to improve their attendance record and a form used to summarize an attendance conference with such employees. (Author/JM)

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THE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR'S POLICY **PORTFOLIO**

A Component of the EDUCATIONAL POLICIES SERVICE Vol 13 No. 3 March 1982

HOW MILWAUKEE OFFICIALS ADMINISTER THEIR BOARD'S SICK LEAVE POLICY

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"It seems that every board I've seen recently has been upset about abuse of sick leave," said NSBA policy consultant Mary Brodinsky. Brodinsky had just returned from a round of on-site school visits and found, among the stack of mail on her desk, a packet post-marked from Milwaukee. Opening the envelope, Brodinsky, who has helped more than 100 school districts compile and update policy manuals, found two documents she believed would help any administrator cut down excessive staff absences. One document was a list of recommendations to the Milwaukee board on how it could reduce teacher absenteeism; the second, a complete handbook for supervisory staff on how to administer the district's sick leave policy (see story, page 4).

The recommendations. In October, 1979, the Milwaukee board was concerned about an increasing use of sick leave, so it hired an outside firm to study the district's administration of leave policy. Although the firm found that Milwaukee teachers used sick leave no more or less than other districts, it did report to the board that leave use could be reduced if administration of the policy were tightened up.

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SAMPLE 1

WARNING LETTER
(From the Milwaukee Public Schools Handbook on Sick Leave Administration)

Name Date

Dear ----:

Sick leave with pay is a benefit authorized to School Board employees. To ensure the proper use of the sick leave benefit, we are following a program which includes regular review of attendance records. This is not intended to create undue hardship for any School Board employee, but only to alert employees to their responsibilities for the proper use of sick leave benefits.

We find that your attendance record indicates there is need for improvement. It may be that you need medical attention. We encourage you to seek the medical attention you may need to improve your attendance record. Further action on our part will be avoided if your sick leave record improves. Should you wish to discuss this matter, you may feel free to do so.

Sincerely yours,

Principal, Division or Department Head

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MILWAUKEE OFFICIALS (From page 1)

Of 19 recommendations, the board accepted 18 at its March 25, 1980, meeting and administrators set to work. In the two years since that meeting, the rate of teacher absence has dropped from 8.74 to 7.6 days annually--even though six recommendations have not yet been implemented.

Here's what district administrators did or are doing:

° Revised the orientation kit for new teachers to include information on district philosophy toward good attendance.

° Publish, from time to time, articles about sick leave usage in the district's *Staff Bulletin*.

° Issue periodic reminders to principals and supervisors on sick leave usage, case studies, interpretations of contract provisions regarding sick leave, and so on.

° Provide periodic training to principals and unit heads on control of sick leave.

° Made principals responsible for maintaining absence records, a shift from the former procedure whereby all records were kept by the central office.

° Developed a manual on administration of sick leave which includes clear-cut procedures for handling misuse of the leave policy.

° Modified staff evaluation forms to include room for comments on attendance.

° Increased publication of the district-wide sick leave usage report from two to four times annually, and amended its format so that absences are now listed by type rather than chronology. In addition, a new biweekly report on high sick leave users now goes to principals, and the board gets an annual report ranking schools as to sick leave usage.

° Developed a program of recognizing good attendance, which includes giving teachers an extra personal leave day if they use four or fewer days of sick leave during one school year.

° Help employees prevent illness by publicizing public health assistance programs as they are available.

° Solicit information on job applicants' attendance at previous jobs.

° Negotiated to eliminate the existing practice of advancing sick leave to employees who had used up their earned days.

Union hang-ups. Of the remaining recommendations, four met fierce union opposition and two, on second thought by the board and administrators, did not seem practical or equitable.

"We wanted to verify reasons for sick leave use, using some sort of absence form," says Wage and Salary Administrator Robert F. Williams, "but the union proved to be a tremendous obstacle to that goal." Also abandoned in face of union opposition were efforts to:

° Conduct a survey of employee attitudes toward working conditions, in an attempt

to uncover correctable reasons why employees might not come to work. ("The union didn't want us to talk directly to its members," Williams recalls.)

- Require teachers to notify not only the substitute dispatch office, but also their immediate supervisors of impending absence. (Williams says many teachers do make both calls voluntarily, but the union opposed formalizing this procedure as it was seen as an affront to the teacher's professionalism.)

- Shorten the existing 60-day period between warning letters about poor attendance. (This provision may surface again at the next round of negotiations this spring.)

Administrative impracticality. "So far," says Williams, "it has been impractical to act on the recommendation that we set goals for each school to improve attendance." And another recommendation--to provide special sick leave benefits for older

(Continued page 4)

SAMPLE 2

SUMMARY OF ATTENDANCE CONFERENCE
(From the Milwaukee Public Schools Handbook on Sick Leave Administration)

Name of employee_____ Title_____

When held_____ Where held_____

Was union representative requested?_____

Persons present_____

_____

Days absent current year_____ Days absent previous year_____

Discussion_____

_____

_____

Conclusion_____

_____

_____

Corrective action recommended_____

_____

_____

Deadline for accomplishment_____

_____

_____ _____

Employee's signature Supervisor's signature

MILWAUKEE OFFICIALS *(From page 3)*

employees with good sick leave records who in later years might need more leave because of failing health--was deemed inequitable to other employees. The one recommendation never accepted by the board was to eliminate the practice of printing an employee's remaining sick days on paycheck stubs. Consultants made their recommendation on the belief that employee knowledge of earned leave encouraged leave use, but administrators believed employees had a right to know this information and this was a practical way to make it known. ###

SICK LEAVE ADMINISTRATION: A HANDBOOK FOR PRINCIPALS AND SUPERVISORS

School boards and central office staff can do everything in their power to cut staff absences but, without the support of building-level supervisors, that power won't amount to much. So says all the research on how to reduce staff absenteeism, and Milwaukee school officials didn't contest the point. Instead, they put together a handbook that teaches principals and other supervisors the ABCs of effective sick leave administration. The book, which gets at least partial credit for helping the district cut its absentee rate by more than 7.5 percent in the two years since its publication, contains this information (the complete handbook is available through the EPS/NSBA Policy Information Clearinghouse):

- Foreword outlining the district's philosophy that sick leave is not a right, but a benefit: It is insurance against loss of salary resulting from personal or family illness over which the employee has no control.
- Overview introducing supervisors to what they'll find in successive pages; that is, advice on how to correct and--if necessary--punish excessive leave usage, as well as how to reward good attendance.
- Explicit detail on who is responsible for what. This chapter lists the responsibilities of each teacher, supervisor, and central office person.
- Special procedures for new employees. "Habit and attitudes that determine attendance are largely developed in the first year of employment," this section begins. Central office responsibility for general orientation is noted. Also, supervisors are asked to take time with each new employee to stress the board's desire for good attendance.
- Record keeping and forms. In this section, supervisors are alerted to their responsibility for maintaining attendance records on each employee who reports to them. A whole slew of forms is provided.
- Guidelines for chronic offenders. This section tells how to identify and deal with the chronic offender. Example: "Never criticize, correct, or reprimand an employee in front of others." Tips also are provided on when to issue warning letters, require doctor's verification of illness, or recommend suspension or discharge.
- Incentives for good attendance. Yes, the board offers an extra personal leave day to any teacher who uses four or fewer sick leave days in one year, but supervisors should go beyond that. Don't forget, the handbook cautions, that a "face-to-face pat on the back" can do a world of good.

NSBA

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